

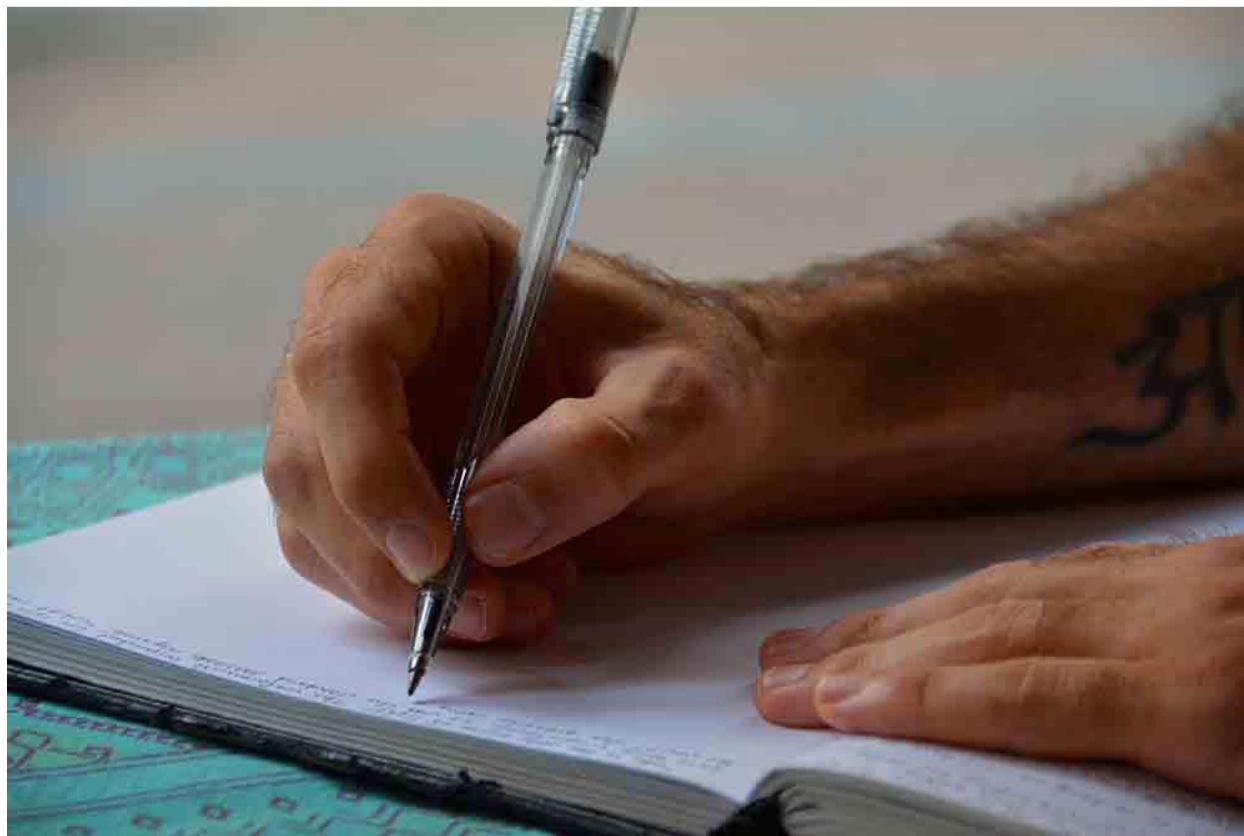
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Arya Jose

Government College for Women

University of Kerala

Alappuzha, Kerala, India

aryajose007@gmail.com

A Haven of Equilibrium For the “Avox”: A Study Of “Third Realm” In Sara Joseph’s *Othappu:*

The Scent of the Other Side

Abstract

Third places are personification of life that features creative interaction with a large community. Third places are often identified as places such as cafes, clubs or parks that are important for civil society. When the framework of a third place palpitates, ‘Third Realm’ is created that can be identified as one’s own room, a chair in the corner or in another person. ‘Avoxes’ are individuals who have been rendered mute by the society for delineating from the existing norms set by them. Avoxes elope into the third realm from the perceived unpleasant, boring, arduous, scary or banal aspects of daily life. They find their lost voice in the third realm where they go in search of equilibrium.

This research paper explores the existence and the possibilities of third realm in Sarah Joseph’s *Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side*. It probes into the patriarchal social set up demarcating the less privileged and pushing them to a state of voicelessness. Through a detailed study an attempt is made to analyze the role of a third realm in the life of the character ‘Margalitha’ in Sarah Joseph’s *Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side* by also trying to address

the motive behind the avox seeking a third realm. Its relevance in today's society and whether a third realm of one's own is appreciated by the society are the two pertinent questions explored in the research paper.

Key Words- Third Place; Third Realm; Avox; Society; Equilibrium

Introduction

People have long sought happy places, a place other than the first and second places; the home and workplace respectively. Such a place where an individual feels content, complete and fulfilled is termed 'Third Place' by Ray Oldenburg in his book "The Great Good Place" – an anthropological and sociological treatise. Third places are often identified as places such as cafes, clubs or parks that are important for civil society, democracy, civic engagement, and one that establishes feelings of a sense of place. Places that are free, highly accessible involving regulars or people who habitually congregate there are the essential hallmarks of a true third place as suggested by Ray Oldenburg. When the framework of a third place broadens, exceeding its physical existence and stretching its boundary to infinity, 'Third Realm' equivalent is created. Third realm is an umbrella term that encapsulates under it all kinds of third places including places that need not always be spaces of interaction or a physical area such as a chair, heaven, in a person or in one's own inner self. Third realm is welcoming and comfortable and ultimately provides solace and sanctum that is mostly denied to its inhabitants in the first and second places. The occupants of third realms are not tied down to the area politically, financially, legally, or otherwise and are free to come and go as they please. In contrast to the first and second places, third realms allow people to put aside their concerns and feel a piece of them rooted in the space, and gain spiritual regeneration by spending time there. Occupants of third realm will often have the same feelings of warmth, possession, and belonging as they would in their homes.

For anything to have existence there must be equilibrium of all things. Life in a balanced world is living force and the will is living effort; together they produce a state of equilibrium otherwise called freedom. Those who are curbed of this freedom represent avoxes. The term ‘avox’ derived from Latin, meaning ‘without a voice’, coined by Suzanne Collins best represents the inhabitants of the third realm. An avox is a person who has been punished for being a rebel, a traitor or a deserter. Avoxes have had their tongues cut out rendering them mute. In their pursuit for equilibrium there occurs a materialization of third realms that ultimately help them in locating their lost voices. Avoxes elope into the third realm from the perceived unpleasant, boring, arduous, scary or banal aspects of daily life. They are relieved of the persisting feelings of depression or general sadness through this psychological escapism.

Psychic retreats often carry a derogatory connotation because it comes with the aspects of aloofness and an inability or unwillingness to connect meaningfully with the world. It is often viewed as a philosophical suicide. However these escapades are seen necessary for avoxes who have been shut out or devoiced. C.S Lewis was fond of humorously remarking that the usual enemies of escape were jailers; and considered that, if used in moderation, escapism into the third realm could serve both to refresh and to expand the imaginative powers.

Though an avox has only one life, fate has condemned him to exist in different worlds. His escape from reality is often questioned by many. The answer is unadorned. He is a victim of marginalization. Alienation and disenfranchisement resulting from a person’s social class, race, skin colour, educational status, childhood relationships, living choices or personal choices in lifestyle is an explicit experience for a person in his first and second places. Anyone who appears to deviate in any way from perceived norms of a population may thereby become subject to

coarse or subtle forms of social exclusion. These socially excluded individuals are prevented from fully participating in their first and second places. The two places thereby deny full access to various rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to the socially integrated group.

Third realms thus form the haven of the socially excluded or the socially marginalized. These highly accessible places provide a neutral ground to its inhabitants who might be otherwise excluded and marginalized in their first and second places. Hence it can be viewed as a 'leveling place' where no importance is abided to an individual's status in a society. There are no pre-requisites or requirements that would prevent anyone from accessing their particular third realm. It forms the portal for the alienated into their utopian world. It provides the marginalized with an identity, it restores and supports them and most importantly allows them to be their true self within the third realm. It becomes their place of expression.

In this research paper named "A Haven of equilibrium for the "Avox": A study of "Third Realm" in Sarah Joseph's *Othappu: The Scent Of The Other Side* an analysis of the role of a third realm in the life of the character 'Margalitha' in Sarah Joseph's *Othappu: The Scent Of The Other Side* is performed. The novel has a central female character and protagonist who is in pursuit of her true self and new experiences. *Othappu* deals with the decision of a nun,

Margalitha, to step outside the convent and embrace a life free from the shackles of established religious norms and practices. The character Margalitha is the avox in the novel who is in pursuit of her lost voice.

The protagonist comes from an affluent family with considerate parents. Yet she feels disenfranchised and marginalized within her own home and society. As a reason the prime

character escapes into her third realm which is a ‘forest’ in the case of Margalitha. It is interesting to note how individuals are driven to seek a third realm of their own. Margalitha gradually experiences her awakening to the possibility of a more free and full life through her third realm.

The Insane’s Sanity

Carpe diem once prevailed as the master trope. The will to live to its fullest brought along challenges and indispensable setbacks. The freedom to live according to one’s own wish is the right of any individual. When this freedom is violated there arises a power hierarchy which leads to the formation of a marginalized group in the society. In a patriarchal establishment women are treated as the ‘other’ and they are subjected to suppression and discrimination. The same act of violation take two different effect on male and female. The hegemony confines women to the fringes of the society. The andocentric nature of the society had a setback after the waves of Feminism. But still the unprivileged have to struggle and fight in order to define their place. Many schools provided grounds for new discourses. Subaltern studies have thus provided a wide platform for discourses on marginalization. In that group of the marginalized women comprise a major part.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s ideas of Strategic Essentialism, Subaltern and the other are notable. She is an Indian-born scholar, teacher, and translator. Spivak is the author of a number of books, including *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography* (1985), *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987), *Thinking Academic Freedom in Gendered Post-Coloniality* (1993), *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), *Death of a Discipline* (2003) and *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012). Through her phenomenal work *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing*

Historiography, Spivak has been able to give a voice to the subaltern. Subaltern represents the avoxes. It consists of those people of inferior rank who are modeled upon by the society to fit the framework created by the oppressor or the mould devised for the oppressed. Any being that is denied of freedom, expression and rights to an equal livelihood can be termed a subaltern. Gayatri Spivak has the most theoretical look at the subaltern, and her work is still the root text for a discussion of the subaltern, in her article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Though the answer to her essay is no, we would like to partly agree with it too. No, the subaltern cannot speak, but yes in his or her respective ‘third realm’.

The subdued people who are literally imprisoned don’t find their voices echoing into the society’s empyreal. Their weak yells are lost in frenzy of the community. Gayatri Spivak's line of reasoning was developed in *Geographies of Post colonialism* (2008), wherein Joanne Sharp proposed “ Western intellectuals relegate other, non-Western (African, Asian, Middle Eastern) forms of *knowing*—of acquiring knowledge of the world—to the margins of intellectual discourse, by re-formulating said forms of *knowing* as myth and as folklore. Therefore, in order to be heard and known, the oppressed subaltern must adopt Western ways of *knowing*, of thought, reasoning, and language; because of such Westernization, a subaltern people can never express their ways of *knowing* (thought, reasoning, language) and instead must conform expression of their non–Western knowledge of colonial life to Western ways of knowing the world.”

In a scenario where the native wisdom of the subaltern is ignored and considered completely irrelevant, a third realm is a significant position to hold on to for the unvoiced. Women who are the downtrodden of the downtrodden mostly depend on their self-constructed third realms for a self-introspection. Our female persona under study, Margalitha, is a victim of

double marginalization who creatively sought out a realm of her own for her self-expression and she identifies herself as a subaltern. It is this revelation that backs her in her quest for her private realm which helps her in attaining her epitome of self.

Sarah Joseph is a prolific novelist and a short story writer in Malayalam. She won Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel 'Aalahayude Penmakal'. She has been in the forefront of feminist movement in Kerala and is the founder of 'Manushi', an organization of thinking women. She is a well-known social activist. Sarah's works are essentially liberalistic and convey the sentiments of various oppressed groups. Her selected works are 'Manasile Thee Maatram' 1973, 'Kaadinte Sangeetham' 1975, 'Aathi', 'OoruKaaval', 'Thaikulam', 'Puthuramayanam', 'Oduvilathe Sooryakanthi' etc. She is famous for her trilogy 'Aalahayude Penmakal', 'Mattathi' and 'Othappu'.

Sarah Joseph's *Othappu* is one such novel based on the chief concepts of third place, marginalization and psychological escapism. Everyone needs a third realm in his or her life to get rid of the unsatisfactory world around and to find happiness, peace, love and satisfaction that the life has to offer. Third places are simply places where we spent most of the time when we are not at home and not working.

Othappu is about a woman's yearning for a true understanding of spirituality and her own sexuality. It is a Malayalam novel published in 2005. *Othappu* has a central female character and protagonist named Margalitha. The novel deals with the decision of a nun to step outside the convent and embrace a life free from the shackles of established religious norms and practices followed by the society. In this novel, the character Margalitha comes face to face with the church and the society which refuse to accept her personal views and she is not given individual

freedom. Her family and society expect her to conform to a particular framework in place regarding those joining nunnery.

‘Once you are caught in a system, it is best to cooperate with its dictates. If you walk out, your rebellion will exact a crushing physical and spiritual cost.’ (Othappu, 5)

Margalitha is a nun who leaves the convent because she cannot pretend to be happy in a world she dislikes. The family, the society, the church, everyone considers her to be an outcaste. This shows marginalization, the process whereby something or someone is pushed to the edge of a group and given less importance. Certain people are supposed to live in a particular way in a society otherwise they are considered outcaste or are marginalized or treated unequally.

“Children, we have no alternative. Suppress your hopes and strangle your dreams.”(Othappu, 5)

Margalitha’s family is shocked by her deed and locks her up in a store room (an iruttumuri) outside the house used for keeping raw bananas for ripening. She is kept locked up without food or water for three days. She then realizes that no matter what happens, her mother, brothers and society would not accept her back. She leaves her home and searches for a third place where she could rest peacefully and safely without the interference of others.

“Listen to your own true self if you want to know what the world’s greatest “right” is.” (Othappu, 6)

She wanders around and even makes a train journey to Angamaly where she spends a whole night in a hospital as she feels it could be the safest place for her.

‘When the train pulled up at Angamaly, Marghalitha got down there. It made no difference where she stepped out of the train. Every station was the same for her; and reaching Cochin meant nothing in particular.’ (Othappu, 73)

“For days and night, every moment, I considered and re-considered. I reasoned with Jesus. He tells me not to come to him in the garb and prayers of hypocrisy or to choke my soul.” (Othappu, 6)

From there, Fr. Roy Francis Kareekan brings her to his friend John Kaseesa’s house where she lives happily for some time but soon problems start to sprout up which forces her to leave the house so as to avoid conflict with Kaseesa’s family. She is taken care of by her cousin for some time. Later she goes on a jungle retreat with Augustine who is known as ‘Pattipunyalan’ and the forest is known by the name ‘Pattipunyalan’s forest’. Pattipunyalan the saint and the woods act as her third place in this novel.

“In my opinion, it is not by praying but by trying that we build peace” (Othappu, 110)

Forest is the place where she finds peace; it is in the woods that she finds perfect bliss and harmony. The soothing sound of chirping birds, blowing winds and flowing water comforts and heals her wounds. Though she lives in a small hut along with Augustine and Nannu, she is happy. She discovers joy in the nature. She feels secure in the palms of mother earth.

“Man, it takes some guts to live. Life is not meant to be wasted driveling and sniveling. It has a great deal to offer, to laugh and rejoice about, if only you’d dare to take it on.”(Othappu, 186)

“Marghalitha stepped out; walked in the direction his eyes indicated and saw a bridle path. It led to a stream. As she walked, the earth beneath her feet became softer and wetter and dark in colour. Marghalitha bent down, picked up a fistful of earth and sniffed it. It seemed to her as though this narrow path, which wound its way through the bamboo grove that cast the darkness of its lush green foliage over it, was the way to heaven itself. Where Marghalitha ran up to and reached was indeed the doorstep to Heaven! No sound except that of water. From the shadow of a rock, a blue jay soared up and down.

Spellbound, Marghalitha stood there unable to move. Could nature be so awesomely beautiful?” (Othappu, 133)

It is now that the second major character Fr. Roy Francis Kareekan expresses his desire to leave the priesthood to be with her. He attempts to live with Margalitha and brings her to his parents. His parents are shocked and his father commits suicide by hanging himself. This breaks Kareekan who is psychologically, emotionally and ideologically weak. When he comes to know that Margalitha is pregnant with his child, he abandons her and goes to live in a church as a sweeper in a distant place where no one would recognize him.

“Marghalitha’s sins were her dreams. Day and night sins teemed in her dreams. One day Marghalitha dreamt she had given birth. But the baby was missing from the dream.”(Othappu, 52)

This is a sort of escapism that he shows. Though he is the one who leaves the priesthood for Margalitha, instead of supporting her and the unborn child, he tries to escape from the reality. He has become psychologically aloof. Escapism can be used as a term to define the actions people take to help relieve persisting feelings of depression or general sadness.

Meanwhile, Augustine gives Margalitha an orphan boy to take care named 'Nannu' whom she knew from her forest days i.e. when she used to be a refuge in the forest (her third place).

"Compared to becoming a so-called "Gospel Worker", who leads a life of gluttonous indulgence at home and misleads the hungry into believing that it is blessed to be poor and simple... Doing some good to at least one human being is greatly preferred." (Othappu, 93)

Margalitha gains a new confidence and radiance and starts to realize that whatever comes her way she has to fight the existing norms and social structure. She sets out to fulfill her individual destiny along with Nannu and her unborn child, free from the constraints of the church and also from her family and social conventions. "What is my offence?" Marghalitha asked. The incessant rumbling of the waterfalls was the only answer she received. The words of God may sound through wind, rain, thunder, waterfalls and earthquakes." (Othappu, 137)

The novel has the elements of marginalization. It takes the perspective of the "other" as the one who has had no voice because of race, class or gender. It emphasizes that norms are established by those in power and impose on the "other". In the case of Margalitha and Kareekan, who had a respectable position in the society earlier were now suppressed because they chose to

lead a normal life like that of others. They both were supposed to live a life of nun and a priest forever otherwise they were considered as outcaste by the society.

Not only Kareekan but Margalitha also tries to escape the fate instead of facing it and it is only towards the end that she gets ready to face whatever comes her way. This is also a sort of psychological escapism.

Yohanna Kasseessa's home to a great extent and Pattipunya's forest act as a third place where she finds a shelter from the outside world and there she finds herself to be safe, peaceful and protected.

The novel also has several biblical references like three nuns bringing gift for her unborn child, referring to the Magi bringing gifts to the Christ. Rebecca also enacts the role of Mary when she comes to visit Margalitha, discerning that she is pregnant. Characters in this novel are also seen using Bible verses to state or express themselves from time to time.

The main theme of Sarah Joseph's Othappu is that institutionalized church does not satisfy in the end. It is John Kasseessa's home and Augustine's eccentric forest where the reader finds that, rather than an individual, it is the individual who can truly follow Christ and try to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Conclusion

In a digital world as ours third realms take on a much larger role in our lives and, subsequently, in defining ourselves. From casual recreational sports or activities, third realms have achieved the place of an uncompromising aspect that becomes an incorporated part in our

everyday lifestyle. And in the case of avoxes third realms have now become a non- negotiable asset. Its availability and unhindered access significantly impacts the society.

It is evident that in a patriarchal society as ours, women often resort to escaping to their third realms. When being a subject to unwanted suppression and subjugation, the amount of time that they spend in their third realms increases paramount. The avoxes discard the burden of their everyday problems and inhabit a world conceived by them; a world that makes up for the arbitrariness and unpredictability of the real world by offering structure, rationality and purpose. They find simple pleasure in immersing oneself in the predictable comfort of their third realm, forgetting the real world filled with alienation and marginalization.

In our society such third realms often carry a negative connotation. Experts believe that escapism, or withdrawing from the pressures of the real world into a safer fantasy world, are pervasive in our culture. It comes in many forms, some rather subtle, and prevents us from doing what we need to do to improve the circumstances of our real lives. They even insist on the fact that the ultimate “goal” of escapism is the destruction of “self”. If you have an aspect of your life that you want to escape from, your fantasies act as a means of dissociating your mind from the “you” that possesses these qualities. When we practice escapism, we are trying to avoid “spending time” with ourselves. Even the mere act of reading is seen as an escapist pursuit. Researchers believe that coping by escaping into their thirds realm can cause depression too. Charges of superficiality are brought up against these avoxes who abscond into their particular third realms. Such an act is interpreted as false and unfounded.

Pitted against its supposedly superior counterpart, realism, escapism is considered inconsequential and superfluous. Though major academicians maintain that the ability to find a

third realm is an integral part of a healthy adult, others take less favorable views; there are even fewer professionals willing to accept the validity and the possibility of the existence of third realm. However the social and emotional value of third realms cannot be ignored because it avails the avoxes an escape into an alternate world. In fact, by allowing these escapes, the avoxes find a way to release their emotions, be more compassionate, something researchers believe that will stimulate their empathic muscles. In the vast vicinity of their third realms, 'catharsis' takes place. The avoxes purify themselves by engrossing themselves in their particular third realms. They are purged of their emotions. It is the place where they find their key to happiness and answers to some unanswered questions. A healthy motivation to seek escape into the third realms results in a more informed view of self. It offers more insight into human behaviour. What is perhaps not understood by critics is that the quest for a third realm does not mean a denial or evasion of real life issues; rather, it presents a more layered and complex way of looking at the world. It is not an escape from reality but a way to understand it. In a world that is engrossed in perfection, some are pushed to the fringes. Thus third realms are their way of attaining perfection or creating a world where everything is guided by 'their' norms and perfect rules. Third realms offer the avoxes a way to cope with the inharmonious situations that they face in their everyday life. It's their means to escape the drabness, conformity, and modernization of modernity.

An avox uses the third realm as an occasional means of taking a mental break from the stressors of life. And even better if he uses it to explore his imagination. An avox can thus gain access to a wider range of ideas and possible solutions to issues he may be having than he would by strictly adhering to reality. Ultimately, it comes down to a person's mind-set. Even if you are running away from reality but if you are accessing another world in order to gain some insights to bring back to reality, you will profit. A community that does not or will not recognise this does so at their own cost, because they then would be limiting the participation and the influx of talent that will drive their own economic prosperity.

The society, as a matter of fact, any institution, needs a hierarchy to keep its machinery going. Such a hierarchy will definitely lead to the issue of inequality. Consequently, hierarchical establishment leaves a stratum of the society downtrodden and suppressed. In a patriarchal society, women and children are placed along with many other sections of unprivileged. They become voiceless and have to fight their way to give voice to their suppressed feelings. Margalitha is representative of all women who stand devoiced in the patriarchal society. As Walter Scott mentions she belongs to the weaker sections and she takes up the weapon of the weak. Her resorting to a third realm can be found as her way of resistance towards the existing hegemony. When the societal norms wants her to oblige to the existing patriarchal laws, she opposes it in her own little ways for survival. For Margalitha it is the remote forest that proves to be her third realm. Thus such a space becomes a breathing space for the avox from where she musters up her courage and gives vent to her voice. It is a matter of survival for her rather than just a resistance. In fact resistance itself proves to be a mechanism for her survival.

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